SOME NEW BOOKS.

Balzac's Novels.

Can there be a more conclusive proof of literary vitality than the reproduction of an author's works long after his death by translations into foreign languages? It has been said that the verdict of posterity concerning a writer's merit is foreshadowed in that of his foreign contemporaries. In the test which we begin by suggesting both conditions are present, to wit: remoteness of time and difference of the linguistic medium through which the mind is addressed. Shakespeare is able to meet this test, but what English novelist can do it? Walter Scott was once admired almost as much on the Continent as he was in Great Britain, but, at the end of the nineteenth century, what French or German publisher would dream of putting forth a new and complete translation of the Waverley novels? What is true with regard to Scott is even truer with regard to Dickens, who, compared with the Wizard of the North, had but few readers on the Continent, and of Thackeray, whose reputation has been strictly limited to the Anglo-Saxon world. On the other hand, is there any French writer of prose fiction, belonging to a former generation, a new and complete version of whose stories would be at this time deemed a promising commercial venture by any English or American publisher? The "Three Musketeers" and "Monte Cristo" still circulate in English versions made many years ago, but nobody would think of presenting a new and even approximately complete translation of the multitudinous novels credited to the elder Dumas. The "Wandering Jew" and the "Mysteries of Paris" of Eugène Sue still find readers in England and the United States, and the same thing may be said of certain novels of George Sand's, but the proposal to issue a new and exhaustive translation of the works of either of those writers would be rejected as absurd. Such being the effect of time upon the productions of almost all French and English novelists, what are we to make of the fact that, although Honoré de Balzac died in 1850, yet now, on the very eve of the twentieth century, no fewer than three translations of his novels, each putting forward pretensions to completeness more or less justified, are offered to the English-speaking world? One of these, issued by Roberts Brothers of Boston, has been in course of publication for some years; it is deserving of much commendation on the score of the English style, but it has this demerit, that many of the volumes are abridged, and almost all of them are expurgated. A second translation is being brought forth in London under the editorship of George Saintsbury; the prospectus omits no fewer than eight volumes of the Paris *Édition Définitive*, besides the "*Contes Drolatiques*." Still a third translation, admirably printed and illustrated, has just been published in fifty-one volumes by G. Barrie & Son of Philadelphia. This is neither abridged nor expurgated, and is the only English version which may claim to present everything contained in the *Édition Définitive* brought out in Paris by Michel Levy in the seventies. When we consider the amount of capital that must needs be embarked in the least complete of these translations and keep in view at the same time the date at which they are almost simultaneously issued, we cannot but recognize the weight of the evidence thus forthcoming for the exceptional duration of Balzac's influence and charm.

I.

To what is the continuance of Balzac's popularity due? For convenience, the question might be divided: Why is Balzac still popular in France, and why may he be read with almost equal pleasure and profit outside of his native country? About the admiration which has been expressed for Balzac by his countrymen during the two generations that have followed his death, no doubt is possible. Victor Hugo has called him "first among the great, highest among the best." A like tribute has been paid to him by Taine, the philosopher and historian, and by Barbey d'Aurevilly, who, being asked which of Balzac's books he preferred, replied, "The one I have just read." He is credited with a genius almost transcendent by Théophile Gautiere, by Charles Baudelaire and by Théodore de Banville. In him, Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola have recognized the first of realists, although he was equally successful in the realm of the pure imagination. Bourget would describe him as "an analytical visionary," by whom the miracle of preserving an equilibrium between fancy and fact was accomplished so skilfully that it is scarcely possible to separate in him the painter, the philosopher, the poet and the critic. It is the intimate fusion of elements so diverse that renders his books unique and makes them the source of extraordinary intellectual satisfaction. It is Bourget, also, who, endeavoring to explain the permanence of Balzac's charm, finds in him the epitome not only of his own time, but of the whole nineteenth century. Himself an avowed disciple of Balzac's, he does not find it surprising that men educated like the author of the *Comédie Humaine*, and, like him, dominated by romantic aspirations amid the struggle for bread, and impelled by revolt against a commonplace destiny to a heroic and desperate tension of all the faculties, should recognize themselves in his books. Indeed, Bourget does not hesitate to acknowledge that Balzac "has even revealed us of the end of the century to ourselves, and one is able to say with truth that French society to-day resembles the *Comédie Humaine* more than it resembles the actual society on which that *comédie* was modelled." For Frenchmen, Balzac has proved himself to be a prophet, because he included in himself not only all the sentiments and ideas of his time as they revealed themselves to his eye, but also those sentiments and ideas as, carried to their fullest fruitage, they reveal themselves to onlookers of our own day.

This might be true, and still it might be difficult to account for the almost simultaneous appearance of three English translations of the Human Comedy. Considered merely as a pictorial artist, Balzac indeed might still challenge the profound attention of foreign students of French history as this has been evolved under the varying conditions of the present century. The attention would, of course, be emphasized if it were perceived that the ultimate outcome of the social phenomena observed and reproduced by him had been detected and predicted. Conceding, however, to Balzac all merit that has been claimed for him as a social historian, we can see that if this were all, the scrutiny of his writings might be relegated, so far as English readers are concerned, to a small group of inquirers, who, being, in all likelihood, equipped with a knowledge of French, would have no use for an English translation. The truth is that Balzac did more than photograph the France of his time and forecast the France of to-day. It is true that the scope of much of Balzac's work may be thus limited, if it be examined solely from the æsthetic viewpoint, but, when we pass from Balzac the artist to Balzac the thinker, we perceive that his usefulness, his power of revelation and of inspiration, cannot be hemmed in by racial or by geographical boundaries. He is something far wider and higher than a realistic painter, gifted with an uncommon faculty for bringing out spiritual characteristics; he is also, deliberately and systematically, a philosopher, a psychologist, a sociologist, and, in these three fields of thought, he is obliged to begin by investigating mankind as a whole, instead of a variety of it determined by local conditions; he is obliged to formulate general principles, applicable at all times and everywhere. The results, for instance, of his explorations and exposition of the feminine mind and heart will remain illuminative and instructive in all parts of the civilized world until the day arrives when woman shall obtain complete social equality with man. Even then the value of Balzac's psychological study of woman will be but partially impaired by the necessity of adjusting some of his conclusions to a revolutionized environment. Full of penetrating wisdom also, valid under all skies and at all dates, are his reflections on the effect of education, under that term being comprehended not only the influence of precept, example and surroundings, but also the reaction therefrom. With equal insight he discusses the effect of diverse occupations, from those of statecraft to those of the humblest order, upon the personal character and upon the attitude of the individual toward the community. So far, then, as Balzac is a thinker, and the thinker is no less conspicuous than the artist in almost every one of his productions—he is more richly stored with household and social philosophy than is George Eliot, and may be read by Englishmen and Americans with no less profit and with more delight than can the author of "Middlemarch." From his works, indeed, as Bourget has pointed out, may be gleaned, as from those of Shakespeare, a large collection of striking and fruitful maxims; maxims the force of which is doubled because they are demonstrated, not as abstract hypotheses, but as concrete realities, viewed with the surgical eye which takes in at a glance the wound and the operation necessary to heal it. For Englishmen and Americans, in a word, as well as for his countrymen, to read Balzac is to see life, to fathom it, to participate in it with all one's imaginative powers, and it is also to learn the laws which govern its decay and its growth, its losses and its gains.

II.

When did Balzac first conceive the idea of arranging his books in the comprehensive framework to which he gave the name of the Human Comedy? The purpose, which may be described not merely as ambitious, but as ecumenical, was announced in 1842 in a preface to the first volume of "Splendors and Miseries." At that time Balzac was 43 years old, and had only about eight years to live; of his avowed novels, included in the *Édition Définitive*, only a part, though the major part, had been finished. In that preface he tells us that the first idea of the *Comédie Humaine* came to him like a dream, an impossible project which he welcomed and then allowed to escape. He was subsequently attracted more seriously to the plan by detecting, as he thought, an analogy between the human and animal kingdoms. In the animal kingdom there is unity amid endless variety. It seemed to Balzac that in this respect human society resembles nature. Does not society mould a man in accordance with the environment in which he lives and moves; does it not create as many different kinds of men as there are different zoölogical varieties? This question Balzac answered by maintaining that the differences between a soldier, an artisan, an administrator, a lawyer, an idler, a scholar, a statesman, a merchant, a sailor, a poet, a pauper and a priest, though more difficult to understand, are quite as considerable as those that distinguish the wolf, the lion, the ass, the crow, the shark, the seal and the sheep. There are, in a word, social species, just as there are zoölogical species. Scientists have not shrunk from the attempt to include the whole of zoölogy in the compass of one work; was there not something of the same kind to be accomplished in behalf of society? Unquestionably, an exhaustive delineation of human types would prove more difficult, because between the different species of the animal kingdom nature has set bounds which do not exist in human society. When Buffon, for instance, described a lion he needed but a few additional words with which to draw the picture of a lioness, whereas in society a woman is not always the female of the male. In one household there may exist two entirely dissimilar beings. A shopkeeper's wife is sometimes worthy of a prince, while a prince's wife may not be the equal of a poor artist's. The social state, in a word, of man is subject to possibilities that are not to be found in nature, for it is nature plus society. The description of social species is, therefore, at least twice as complex as that of animal species under the aspect of the two sexes alone. Lastly, there is no confusion in the life of animals, and few dramas take place among them; they merely pursue and attack one another. Men also pursue one another, but the greater or less degree of intelligence they possess renders the combat far more complicated. It is certain that a grocer may become a peer, and that a nobleman may sink into the lowest rank of society. Then, again, the life of animals is extremely simple. It needs but few accessories; consequently they have neither arts nor sciences, whereas man tends to represent his manners, life and thought in all that he appropriates to his needs. Although some naturalists—Lubbock, for example—have shown us how interesting the habits of even minute animals are, yet the ways of every animal seem to be the same at all periods, whereas the houses, habits, dress and words of a prince, a banker, an artist, a bourgeois, a priest and a pauper change signally with each successive civilization. The work, then, which Balzac contemplated had a triple purpose, namely, to exhibit men, women and things; that is to say, human beings, and the material representations which they give to their modes of thought; in short, man and his life. To that end not invention but observation was to be the instrument. French society was to be its own historian, and Balzac but the recording secretary. By taking an inventory of virtues and vices, by collecting memorable examples of passion, and by painting from life, by making a selection from the chief social events of his time, and by composing types made up of traits drawn from several characters, he thought he might succeed in writing that history of human manners which is altogether overlooked in so many historical narratives.

This was not, however, by any means the whole of the task proposed to himself by Balzac. By confining himself to the most rigorous reproduction, a writer might be more or less faithful, more or less successful, patient or daring as a painter of human types; he might be the narrator of the dramas of private life and the archæologist of social furnishings; he might catalogue the various professions and keep a record of their good and evil; but, to deserve the praise that every artist must be ambitious of receiving, is it not necessary for him to study the cause or causes of social effects and to apprehend the meanings hidden under the immense mass of figures, passions and events? In order to explore, however, the causes of social phenomena, it is necessary for a writer to start with some working hypothesis, that is to say, with some definite opinions concerning human affairs. In order to throw light upon the inner meaning and soul of his human comedy, Balzac thus propounds his fundamental principles. It should be remembered that he was writing in 1842. "Man is neither good nor evil, but is born with instincts and aptitudes. Society, far from corrupting him, as Rousseau thought, improves him and makes him better, but self-interest develops his evil as well as his good inclinations. Christianity is a nearly perfect system for the repression of the depraved tendencies of man, and constitutes the most important element of social order." A little later he says: "Catholicism and kingship are twin principles, but, in regard to the limits within which they should be confined in order to restrain them from a too absolute development, it is plain that a preface as succinct as the present one should not become a political treatise." Consequently, he does not enter into the religious or political dissensions of the reign of Louis Philippe. Pursuing his confession of faith, he says: "I am writing by the light of two eternal truths, religion and monarchy, which are proclaimed to be indispensable by contemporary events, and toward which every writer of good sense should endeavor to recall our country. Without being an enemy of the elective system, which I regard as an excellent constituent principle of law, I oppose it, considered as the *only* social method; above all, when it is as ill organized as it is to-day. For now, it does not even represent an imposing minority, the ideas and interests of which a monarchical government would be obliged to respect. The elective system universally applied leads to government by the masses, the only government that is irresponsible, and in which there are no bounds to tyranny." Starting with these fundamental principles, Balzac looked upon "the family, and not the individual, as the true unit of society." It is scarcely needful to remind the reader that Balzac knew little of the theory, and less of the working, of American institutions.

Are Balzac's novels, or any of them, essentially immoral? Let us hear their author on that point: "By copying the whole of society, and reproducing it in all its tumultuous agitation, it must inevitably result that a composition should exhibit more evil than good, and that part of the fresco should represent a group of guilty characters." It too often happens, however, that the critic cries out against the immorality depicted in one corner of a canvas without directing equal attention to the morality inculcated by another part of the picture intended as a complete contrast to the first. Touching this tendency to a one-sided view, Balzac observes that "the most conscientious moralists are extremely doubtful whether society can show as many good as bad actions, but in the picture I have drawn of it there are more virtuous than reprehensible characters. I have made all errors, sins and crimes, from the most trifling to the most serious, meet with punishment, human or divine, secret or public. I have done better than the historian, for I am freer than he." In another passage of the preface he says: "It may be permitted to me to draw attention to the many characters of irreproachable virtue in the published portions of my work: Pierrette, Ursule Mirouët, Constance Birotteau, La Fosseuse, Eugénie Grandet, Marguérite Claës, Pauline de Villenoix, Mme. Jules, Mme. de la Chanterie, Eve Chardon, Mlle. d'Esgrignon, Mme. Firmiani, Agathe Rouget, Rénée de Maucombe; also many less important characters, who, though thrown into less conspicuous relief than those mentioned above, offer the reader the same example of domestic virtue. Do not Joseph Lebas, Genestas, Benassis, the priest Bonnet, the doctor Minoret, Pillerault, David Séchard, the two Birotteaus, the priest Chaperon, Judge Popinot, Bourgeat, the Sauviats, the Tascherons and many others resolve the difficult literary problem of making a virtuous character interesting?"

III.

Having determined to make his canvas commensurate with the whole social organization of France, explored from the top to the bottom, Balzac naturally proceeded to divide and classify his subject. He decided to distribute his work into scenes of private life, of provincial life, of Parisian life, of political life, of military life, of country life. In these six groups were to be collected all the studies of manners and morals that were to make up the general history of society. The six groups correspond to general ideas; that is to say, the scenes of private life represent childhood and youth, with the failings peculiar to those two periods of human existence; the scenes of provincial life delineate the age of passion, calculation, self-interest and ambition, while the scenes of Parisian life give a picture of the tastes, vices and all the unbridled tendencies called into being by the customs peculiar to a great capital in which the extremes of good and evil meet. Each of these three groups has its local color. Not only men and women, but also the chief events of life are expressed by types. Balzac points out that "there are situations and typical phases represented in every individual existence, and I have tried to be especially exact in this branch of my subject." He has also endeavored, he says, to give an idea of the different parts of his beautiful country. "My work has its geography as well as its genealogy and its families, its places and its things, its people and its facts; as it has its heraldry, its nobles and its bourgeois, its artisans and its peasants, its politicians, its dandies and its army—in fact, a whole world of its own."

After having portrayed social life in the three groups mentioned, it still remained for Balzac to describe the exceptional existences that exemplify the interests of some or all of those who are, in any respect, outside of the ordinary laws of life. Hence the scenes of political life. Then again, having completed a vast photograph of society at peace, was not he called upon to represent it also in a state of warfare, bursting its bounds for defense or conquest? Hence the scenes of military life. Finally, the scenes of country life represent the evening of the long day, if the social drama may be described in terms of time. In this last-named group are to be found the purest characters limned by the author, and the application of the great principles of order, wisdom, and morality.

Such is the foundation of tragedy and comedy that underlies the "philosophic studies" which constitute the second part of the Human Comedy, and in which the social means to every end were to be discussed and the ravages of thought and sentiment investigated. The first book of this series, "The Wild Ass's Skin," connects the studies of manners and morals with the philosophic studies by the link of an oriental fancy, in which life itself is represented in a deadly struggle with desire, the first principle of every passion. Beyond the philosophic studies were to come the analytical studies, of which but one was completed, to wit, "The Physiology of Marriage." Still later Balzac meant to add three other works of the same general character, namely, "The Pathology of Social Life," next "The Anatomy of Universities," and then the "Monograph of Virtue." After thus outlining his monumental purpose, Balzac says: "On seeing all that there remains for me to do, some one may say of me what my publishers said, 'May God grant you a long life!'" He had, as we have said, but eight years to live.

Having indicated what Balzac essayed to do, let us, before glancing at his achievements in detail, recall the main incidents of his relatively short life. He was the son of a lawyer who, at the time of his birth, held office under the Directory in the Commissariat. He was sent at an early age from his home in Tours to the college at Vendôme, where he neglected the studies and the sports of childhood to bury himself in mystic books and reveries. He has recounted the story of his school days in "Louis Lambert," and told us how he composed a "Theory of the Will," which was to complete the works of Mesmer, Lavater, Gall and Bichat. This treatise was burned by one of his schoolmasters, and Balzac, whose consequent despondency impaired his health was sent home. The next stage in his education was a course of study at the Sorbonne, after which he attended lectures on law, and in the offices of attorneys and notaries picked up the knowledge of chicanery, which he was to exhibit so freely in his novels. He refused to become a notary, and did not complain when he was placed upon short allowance to convince him that he could not succeed in literature. No one recognized more clearly than he did that his first literary ventures were failures. He disavowed all of them later, and forbade their republication. The ten years of toil and poverty which succeeded his receipt of his law diploma are described in "Facino Cane" in "The Wild Ass's Skin," and in a series of letters to his sister, Mme. de Surville, which have been preserved. Among the many desperate methods of making a livelihood that he essayed was the rôle of solicitor for subscriptions to books; his experience in this direction is described in "The Illustrious Gaudissart." Like Mark Twain, he became a publisher, and, like Mark Twain, he failed. Then he became a typefounder and printer, but in this venture, also, he was unsuccessful. During a large part of the third decade of his life he found that "three sous for bread, two for milk and three for firewood" would suffice to keep him alive while he devoured books in a public library, copied out his notes at night, and wandered for hours among the scenes of nocturnal Paris. Through his business undertakings he accumulated a load of debts which weighed on him almost to the end of his life. To pay those debts he worked as hard as did Walter Scott after the failure of the latter's publisher. When Balzac finally made up his mind that if he wished to succeed he must concentrate his energies upon writing only, his industry and productiveness were extraordinary. His custom was to dine at 5 P. M., to sleep until 11 or 12 and then to arise and work until about 9 in the morning. If he did not work he would pace his room all night planning some future book and arranging the method of its execution in detail. In ten years he produced fifty-four volumes. Altogether he wrote ninety-seven novels. The first drafts were sometimes composed as rapidly as Scott's. He tells his sister that "The Old Maid" was written in three nights, and that the first fifty sheets of "Lost Illusions" were completed in three days. He spent far more time than did Scott, however, on the correction of his copy. In this respect he may be compared with Pope. One of his publishers has testified that he was in the habit of revising his proofsheets ten or a dozen times. He would sometimes spend an hour in search of one right word, and there are pages of his in which, as in the pages of Flaubert, the French language is tortured in order to compel it to yield the maximum of expression in the smallest compass.

IV.

We may now take up the several groups and most of the novels composing them in the order which the author gave them in his final classification. The first group, entitled "Parisian Life," includes "Splendors and Miseries," "Cousin Bette," "Cousin Pons," "Cæsar Birotteau," "The House of Nucingen," with which are bound in the same volume the "Secrets of La Princesse de Cadignan," "Sarrasine," "Facino Cane," "A Man of Business" and "The Involuntary Comedians." Another volume belonging to the same group contains "The Civil Service" and "A Prince of Bohemia;" still another, "The Chief of the Devorants" and "La Duchesse de Langeais." Finally, two volumes are required for "The Petty Bourgeois."

"Splendors and Miseries," which begins the *Édition Définitive*, is really a sequel of "Lost Illusions," which was placed by Balzac in another group. The story portrays the last phases of the career of "A Great Man of the Provinces in Paris," and thoroughly justifies the author's claim that he has made all errors, sins and crimes, from the most trifling to the most serious, meet with punishment, human or divine, secret or public. It is impossible to feel much sympathy for the hero, and it is equally impossible not to follow him through the vicissitudes of his short life with poignant interest. The passions that move most of the characters in this book are the intense desire of boundless wealth, of luxury, and of social distinction. Among his numerous productions, Balzac himself hesitated whether to award the palm to "Splendors and Miseries" or to the second novel in this group, "Cousin Bette," which exhibits on the one hand the tremendous power for evil doing evolved through the self-concentration incident to a celibate state, and, on the other hand, the havoc wrought in a respectable household through indulgence in the sexual appetite prolonged beyond the limits of old age. "Cousin Pons," which to Bourget seems the author's masterpiece, was, as it happened, the last novel penned by Balzac when he was about to be attacked by that disease of the heart which was destined to prove fatal. It is an account of the illness of an old musician and collector of curios who was cared for by a devoted friend and despoiled by a vast conspiracy of rival lovers of bric-à-brac, covetous business men and corrupt servants. In its pages will be found some curious notes on Germany and the Germans, which are doubtless read with zest by Parisians at the present time. No reader of this book would guess from internal evidence that its author had already written nearly a hundred works of fiction. He was not a man who could ever write himself out, for he was incessantly assimilating new materials and evolving from them new ideas. Almost every page of "Cousin Pons" is charged with impressions, reflections and theories. One perceives not only that the author is in nowise exhausted, but also that he is not husbanding himself for a future work, but, on the contrary, is dispensing with a free hand the best fruitage of his experience. There are those who think "Cæsar Birotteau" unsurpassed for a realism which is at once photographic and sympathetic. This is the story of an upright Paris tradesman who becomes a bankrupt, but who, ultimately, succeeds in paying his creditors in full. We see him in his hour of bourgeois glory, in his long period of eclipse and shame and in his brief moment of rehabilitation. The whole mechanism of retail trade and of the laws regulating the payment of commercial debts is here minutely set forth, yet so intimately is the exposition associated with the hero's fortunes that the digressions never weary. It is types of the commercial class which are delineated in "The Petty Bourgeois," also, though the canvas here is larger and contains a greater number of figures. Although this is one of the longest stories penned by Balzac, it contains relatively few episodes. All is movement, incident and dialogue. In the two volumes allotted to it the author's belief that wrongdoing is certain to meet with retribution in this world is impressively supported. "The Civil Service" seems, at first sight, an unpromising subject for a novel, but Balzac not only succeeds in interesting us in his characters, but he brings out in the strongest light the causes of the mediocrity of the French administration, a mediocrity which is quite as pervasive in our day as it was in his. He shows that, in the French bureaucracy, the clerk is occupied solely in maintaining himself, in keeping or bettering his position and in obtaining his pay. He never gives a thought to improvements in administrative methods or to the welfare of his country. A superior man can with difficulty walk along the tortuous paths of the bureaucracy, bow, cringe and slide in the mire. The sudden appearance of a truly remarkable mind would frighten everybody. The fact that Government officials are composed almost exclusively of men of small intellects constitutes a grave obstacle to the prosperity of the country. Balzac compares the intrigues that are hatched among petty officeholders to those which take place in the seraglio between the eunuchs, the women and the imbecile Sultan, or to the little quarrels of nuns full of secret vexations, or to mean college tyrannies. The spectacle of these intrigues, he says, resembles the jumping of fleas harnessed to a pasteboard cart. Undoubtedly there are exceptions in the rank and file of the civil service. There are some men who are really useful, but the real workers are victims of the parasites. Sooner or later all the clerks of the departments find themselves in the condition of wheels screwed on to a machine; the only variation of their lot is to be more or less oiled. This conviction, which is finally driven home to them, stifles the disclosures which they might make regarding the secret evils of the administration, disarms courage and corrupts those who began with the strictest regard for honesty, fatigued as they are by injustice and impelled to carelessness by destructive *ennui*. The stories respectively entitled "Ferragus, Chief of the Devorants," and "La Duchesse de Langeais" are coupled in a volume which bears the general title of "History of the Thirteen." There were, according to Balzac, brought together under the Empire and in Paris thirteen men, all equally possessed by the same sentiment, all of them endowed with sufficient force to remain constant to one idea, sufficiently honorable not to betray one another, even when their individual interests conflicted, sufficiently politic to conceal the ties which united them, sufficiently strong to maintain themselves above all law, courageous enough to undertake anything and fortunate enough to have succeeded almost always in their designs. Ultimately the compact which gave them an almost superhuman force through combination was rescinded, and they quietly returned to the yoke of the civil law, as Morgan, the buccaneer, eventually transformed himself from a destroyer into a peaceful colonist, disposing without remorse by the light of his own fireside of the millions gathered in blood and fire. The story of "La Duchesse de Langeais" is told with great power and pathos. Especially moving is the scene where he that loves her meets her in the convent wherein she has taken the vows, and tragical is her tortured cry to the Mother Superior: "This man is my lover!"

V.

The group of "Scenes from Private Life" comprehends a volume containing "The Cat and Racquet," with some other short stories; "The Memoirs of Two Young Wives;" "Modeste Mignon;" "The Start in Life," with which are bound "Mme. Firmiani" and "The Atheist's Mass;" "Albert Savarus" and "A Daughter of Eve;" "The Marriage Contract" and "Gobseck;" "A Woman of Thirty" and "The Deserted Mistress;" "Honorine" and "Col. Chabert;" "Beatrix;" "A Double Family;" "The Peace of the Household" and "A Study of Woman," and, finally, "Père Goriot."

"The Cat and Racquet," although ostensibly a short story, has all the machinery, all the interest and all the detail of a novel. The difference is that it is compressed as only Balzac could compress; that here and there important events and changes are indicated in a few powerful lines instead of being elaborated, and that the vital points are thrown into strong relief. In "The Memoirs of Two Young Wives" Balzac exemplifies a theory that the marriage of convenience, properly regarded, is preferable to a marriage contracted simply from love. He undertakes to make good the paradox by contrasting the careers of two young girls who have been fellow students at a convent. One of them, an ardent and passionate young woman, kills her first husband, as she confesses, by her perpetual jealousy and exactions, mourns his loss, then marries again for love a second husband, lives with him for a brief period in a dream of ecstasy, and then kills herself from the mistaken belief that his heart had strayed from her. Her friend, on the other hand, dutifully weds to please her parents, calculates beforehand how many children she shall have and how they shall be trained, insists that the marriage shall be merely a nominal contract till she and her husband find themselves united in heart, and finally sees all her brightest visions realized. The effect of the attempt to justify the French theory of marriage is somewhat impaired, however, by the fact that the exemplar of filial duty and of the conventional wife reappears in another story, and falls desperately in love with a man not her husband. In the literary workmanship of this novel Balzac is seen at his best. The other long novels in this group are "Modeste Mignon," "Beatrix," "A Woman of Thirty" and "Le Père Goriot." The purpose of "Modeste Mignon" is to explore and delineate the delicate mysteries of a young girl's mind. In the heroine of this book, as in "Eugénie Grandet," the tremulous vibrations of first love in the heart of a young and pure-minded woman form the subject of the author's studies. The growth of a scarcely acknowledged sentiment which gradually expands into a passion, and which is absolutely free from any taint of sensuality, is analyzed with consummate skill. The scenes and incidents are homely, but out of them Balzac has woven a bright and sparkling story, full of vitalizing power, and showing an elasticity in creative processes which may be well viewed with envy by other writers of domestic fiction. The scene of "Beatrix," like that of several of Balzac's novels, is laid in Brittany, where the moral archæologist who studies men instead of rocks may find a reflection of the age of Louis XIV., or of still more ancient periods. Most of the Breton towns have fallen from some pinnacle of splendor whereof historians do not speak, being sedulous about dates and facts rather than manners, but whereof the memory still lives in the heart of their inhabitants whose national character precludes forgetfulness of matters concerning their native province. A typical young Breton noble who has never left his native town is brought into intimate association with two Parisian women, and the novel records the outcome of his intellectual and spiritual education. One of the feminine portraits is that of Mlle. des Touches, who by some persons has been mistakenly supposed to have been intended by the author for George Sand. It is in "A Woman of Thirty" that Balzac propounds his celebrated thesis that a woman is at her best between 30 and 45. He maintained that a woman's real face does not begin to show until she is 30. Up to that age the painter finds in a woman's countenance only the same shades of pink and white, smiles and expressions that repeat the same thought, an unvarying thought that has no depth; whereas at a riper period everything about a woman speaks; the passions are graven upon her features. Then, again, an unmarried girl has too many illusions, is too inexperienced, and her sex is too much of an accomplice in her love for a young man to be flattered thereby. On the other hand, an older woman knows the whole story of the sacrifices to be made. Where the former is impelled by curiosity, by fascinations unconnected with those of love, the latter obeys a conscientious sentiment. The former yields, the latter chooses. Is not, asks Balzac, to be the object of expert choice a most flattering thing? Armed with knowledge that has almost always been bought by unhappiness, the woman of experience seems, when she gives herself, to give more than herself; while the young girl, ignorant and prejudiced, knowing nothing at all, is unable to make any comparisons or to appreciate anything at its true value; she accepts love and studies it. The one teaches us, advises us at an age when men love to submit to guidance, when obedience is a pleasure; the other wants to learn everything herself, and is artless where the other is affectionate. In a word, the woman of thirty satisfies every craving, while the young girl should satisfy none or she is not a young girl at all. As for the "Père Goriot," the last volume in the group entitled "Private Life," we suppose that a majority of Balzac's readers would rate it at the head of all his works. "Père Goriot" is a modern Lear, and his two daughters are nineteenth century counterparts of Reagan and Goneril. There are Frenchmen who do not hesitate to say that they would rather have written the novel than the play. As regards rapid and consecutive action, chainlike development of plot, distinctness of characterization and consummate command of the emotions, the novel is undoubtedly a marvel. The keynote of the paternal affection to which his life is sacrificed is struck when Père Goriot says to a young friend: "My whole life lies with those two girls. If they enjoy themselves and are happy, if they are prettily dressed and walk on soft carpets, what does it matter to me how I am dressed or how I sleep. I am never cold if they are warm, nor in bad spirits if they are gay. I have no griefs but theirs. I hear their voices everywhere, and a single sad look of theirs chills my blood. One day you will know what it is to care more for your children's happiness than your own. I cannot explain how it is; it is an inward instinct that spreads joy through your whole being. So I really live three lives. Shall I tell you something very strange? When I became a father I understood the nature of God. He exists everywhere, since all creation proceeded from Him. And so it is with me and my daughters, only I love my daughters better than God loves the world, because the world is not so beautiful as God, and my daughters are more beautiful than I." There is, in truth, something sublime about Père Goriot. He demonstrates that true feeling acts like an inspiration. No matter how ordinary a man may be at normal times, yet when he gives expression to a genuine and strong affection, he is steeped in an impalpable essence that alters his countenance, animates his gestures, and lends a new inflection to his voice. Amid the common affairs of life Père Goriot seems a dullard, but under the stress of paternal passion he reaches the highest eloquence of thought, if not of language, and seems to be transfigured.

VI.

In the group to which Balzac gave the general caption of Provincial Life belong "Ursule Mirouet," "La Rabouilleuse," "Pierrette" and "Le Curé de Tour," "Eugénie Grandet," "The Lily of the Valley," "Lost Illusions" and two other volumes which contain a number of short stories. "Ursule Mirouet" is a story of life in the small provincial city of Nemours and of the desperate struggle set on foot by a number of bourgeois heirs to deprive an amiable young girl of the estate intended for her by her guardian, an old physician. There is no figure on Balzac's canvas more flowerlike and winsome than that of Ursule, and it is with the keenest satisfaction that we see her, at last, triumph over her enemies. Nor was this the young girl's only victory. Her aged guardian, a confirmed freethinker, became a Christian before he died, converted by her, not with arguments, but through the touching spectacle of her daily life. "Pierrette" is a household tragedy, some of the details of which are indescribably painful. One might almost describe it as the crucifixion of a gentle and innocent child. Transplanted like a blossom from its native soil, the artless and light-hearted Pierrette is sent from Brittany to become an unwelcome and eventually detested charge upon some sordid-minded cousins in the little town of Provins, in Champagne. She withers and fades under the harsh conditions of her new environment, and finally succumbs to the brutality of her relatives. Incidentally are depicted the struggles of two shopkeepers, who have amassed a little fortune in Paris, to gain a foothold among the bourgeoisie of their native town. Another struggle for an inheritance is recounted in "La Rabouilleuse." Here it cannot be said that virtue triumphs, for, although the original conspirators are foiled, the fortune falls to one of the most execrable types sketched by Balzac, a man whose only merit is brute courage. The sense of justice is not satisfied until he is deprived of most of his ill-gotten gains, and is hacked to pieces in a skirmish with the Arabs in Algeria. "Eugénie Grandet" is a companion picture to "Modeste Mignon," with this exception, that it ends sadly. It is the story of a young woman nobly constituted to perform the duties of wife and mother, but who was to have neither husband nor children. Chance plays a decisive rôle in this novel, and the reader of Balzac will recall how much stress he lays on the effect of accident in human affairs. In "The Lily of the Valley" we witness the sufferings of a young married woman who was not only captivating, tender and passionate, but virtuous. Although most unhappily married, she remained faithful to her husband. In the struggle between love and duty she perished, and preferred to die of regret rather than of remorse. The impression produced by her angelic nature was never effaced. He that loved her wrote of it long afterward: "There are people whom we bury in the ground, but there are some more particularly beloved whose shroud is our heart, whose memory mingles every day with our inmost being; we think of them as we breathe. They are in us by means of the mild law of a transmutation peculiar to love. A soul is within my soul. Whenever I do some good deed, whenever I say a kind word, it is this soul that speaks, that acts; all that I may have of good in me emanates from this tomb as the fragrance of a lily scents the air." In the three volumes collectively entitled "Lost Illusions," the scene is first laid in Angoulême, and is then shifted to Paris, whither a great man of the provincial town goes in the hope of renown and fortune to encounter disenchantment and disgrace. In the first part the character of Lucien Chardon, ultimately to call himself "de Rubempré," is contrasted with that of his brother-in-law David, a pathetic example of the struggling inventor. The seamy side of law in the provinces is disclosed with inimitable vividness, and there are also vivacious pictures of Angoulême aristocratic circles. Another striking contrast is presented in that part of the book which deals with Lucien's first career in Paris, that, namely, between a noble-minded group of writers and artists who prefer studious poverty to any sacrifice of probity or high ideals on the one hand, and, on the other, the environment of gorgeous vice into which Lucien penetrates, and amid which he soon loses his slender stock of principles. Lofty, beautiful or pathetic faces redeem the ugliness and meanness that fill much of the canvas. As we follow Lucien's downward steps, we seem to recognize the inexorable laws of fate exemplified in a Greek tragedy. He is as inextricably caught in the coils of his destiny as are Laocoön and his sons in the serpents' convolutions.

VII.

We come now to the novels which the author classified as "Scenes of Military and Political Life." The group begins with "The Chouans," which, as regards date of authorship, is the earliest of Balzac's works included in the *Édition Définitive*. It depicts the last uprising of the Royalists in Brittany, that which took place in 1799. Victor Hugo has treated a similar theme in "93." But the Revolution had grown milder since the 9th Thermidor, and, in the last days of the Directory, was, apparently, in no condition to withstand its foreign foes, especially should these be aided by a new uprising in the West. Balzac's description of the state of things in rural Brittany in 1799 remained true for many years thereafter. The peculiar conformation of the country and the superstition of the inhabitants excluded all possibility of the agglomeration of individuals in large towns and of the advantages to be derived from the comparison and interchange of ideas. There were not even any villages. The precarious structures that passed for houses were widely scattered over the country. Each family dwelt in its own house as in a desert. The only social gatherings were the ephemeral ones that took place at the parish church on Sundays and holy days. It was in obedience to the voice of the priests that thousands of the peasants rose against the republic. But they were incapable of organized fighting, and, whereas in the earlier struggle La Vendée had turned brigandage into war, Brittany now turned war into brigandage. The banishment of the princes and the overthrow of the Catholic religion were to the Chouans in 1799 nothing more than pretexts for pillage, and the incidents of the internecine contest portrayed by Balzac are marked by the rough savagery of the local customs. "A Dark Affair," the scene of which is laid in 1803 in the province of Champagne, is an account of the mysterious abduction of a Senator, which was the outcome of a complicated political plot, and led to the execution of an innocent man. The heroine, Mlle. de Cinq-Cygne, is a young woman of extraordinary strength of character, and Michu, her devoted servant, who becomes the victim of the conspiracy organized by the agents of Fouché, leaves a lasting impression on the mind. "Mme. de la Chanterie" is one of the books in which Balzac's respect for the Christian religion is most vividly attested. A little knot of human beings, who have cruelly suffered from the shocks of the Revolution, have sought oblivion of their private sorrows in the development of a brotherhood of consolation, over which Mme. de la Chanterie presided. The members of this brotherhood have thrown all their property into a common fund, which is expended in works of charity. The story culminates in the rescue of the man who, at an earlier epoch, had been chiefly chargeable with the judicial murder of the daughter of his benefactress. The purpose of "The Deputy from Arcis" was to exhibit the working of the electoral machinery of 1839 and the political intrigues provoked by it in a small provincial town. It should be noted that only the first part of this story, as it is published in the *Édition Définitive*, is from Balzac's pen. The rest of it was written by Charles Rabou, and published as a serial, two years after Balzac's death, in *Le Constitutionnel*.

"The Country Doctor," "The Village Curé" and "The Peasants" belong in the category of "Scenes of Country Life." In "The Country Doctor" a man of intellect, integrity and imagination seeks relief from disillusion and despair in giving health, comfort and prosperity to the destitute and degenerate inhabitants of an isolated and arid countryside. This is one of the novels in which Balzac is at pains to propound his political views. When we bear in mind that the following words were penned nearly seventy years ago, and recall the subsequent history of France, we must recognize them as amazingly prophetic: "Universal suffrage, which is demanded to-day by those belonging to the Opposition which is called constitutional, was an excellent principle in the Church, because the individuals within it were all well-informed, disciplined by the religious sentiment, imbued with the same system, knowing very well what they wished and whither they were going. But the triumph of the ideas in aid of which modern liberalism imprudently makes war on the prosperous government of the Bourbons would be the ruin of France and of the Liberals themselves. The chiefs of the Left know it well. For them, this contest is a simple question of power. If, which God forbid, the bourgeoisie, under the banners of the Opposition, should succeed in beating down the social superiorities against which their vanity protests, this triumph would be immediately followed by a combat sustained by the bourgeoisie against the people, which later would see in them a sort of nobility, rather mean, it is true, but of which the fortunes and the privileges would be to them all the more odious that they felt them so much the nearer themselves. In this combat, society, I do not say the nation, would perish again, because the triumph—always momentary—of the suffering masses implies the greatest disorders. This combat would be furious, without truce, for it would arise from the discord, instinctive or acquired, between the electors, of whom the portion the least enlightened but the most numerous would get the better of their social superiors under a system in which suffrages count and are not weighed." A little later, in the same book, we read: "Abolish the peerage, all the wealthy classes become privileged; instead of a hundred privileged persons, you will have 10,000 of them, and you will have enlarged the wound of social inequalities. In fact, for the common people the power of living without working constitutes of itself a privilege. In their eyes he who consumes without producing is a spoiler. They insist upon visible works and take no account of intellectual productions, although these most enrich them. Therefore, in multiplying the irritations, you extend the combat to all points of the social body instead of restraining it within a narrow circle. When the attack and the resistance are general, the ruin of a country is imminent. There will always be fewer rich than poor; hence the victory will be to the latter as soon as the contest becomes a physical one."

In "The Village Curé" a woman, for love of whom a man has committed murder and has kept her secret, strives to prove repentance by reclaiming a vast tract of waste land around her chateau, and by offering employment and encouragement to a multitude of her fellow beings. The portrait of the heroine, Veronique, is one of the most rueful in Balzac's gallery, and there is no more affecting incident than her deathbed confession. "The Peasants" is one of the longest of Balzac's compositions, and it should be, undoubtedly, ranked among the finest. He had made a profound study of the effects produced by the agrarian changes incident to the Revolution upon the agriculturists in the provinces of France most distant from the capital, and in this novel he has woven out of these observations the picture of a subterranean but ferocious social war organized against a large landed proprietor by the earth-hunger of the peasants on the one hand and the rapacity of middle-class capitalists on the other. This story is no mere romance, for it is, at times, transformed into a profound political treatise by the depth and acumen of the author's comments and suggestions. He, himself, avows that the aim of this book was to enlighten, not the legislature of to-day, but the legislature of to-morrow. He prophesied that the peasant, "that indefatigable sapper, that rodent who subdivides and parcels out the land and cuts an acre into a hundred bits, that anti-social element created by the Revolution," would, some day, absorb the bourgeoisie as the bourgeoisie had devoured the nobility.

VIII.

With "The Wild Ass's Skin" ("Peau de Chagrin") begins the series of "Philosophic and Analytic Studies" which the author did not live to complete. No reader of this powerful allegory will deny that Balzac is a moral teacher. It inculcates the truth that in life we must pay for every excess that we commit; that what we sow, that also, even in this short life, shall we reap. Among the remarkable features of this book is the detailed description of an antiquarian's collection of curiosities, some of them transmitted from the times of the Pharaohs; a description which leaves upon the mind an impression of one's individual pettiness, not unlike that produced by the study of geology. The brevity of man's written history, contrasted with the geological record, could not be brought out more forcibly in our own day of riper knowledge than it was by Balzac in 1831. "As you trace," he says, "from cutting to cutting, from layer to layer, beneath the quarries of Montmartre or among the slate deposits of the Ural, the discoveries of animals whose fossilized remains belong to antediluvian civilizations, the soul is aghast at the glimpse of the thousands of millions of years, of the thousands of millions of people whom feeble human memory and whom even divine traditions have forgotten, but whose ashes, heaped upon the surface of our globe, form the two feet of earth which yield us bread and flowers." A little later he goes on: "After innumerable dynasties of gigantic creatures, after races of fishes and clans of mollusks, the human race appears at last. These puny men, born yesterday, are able to overstride chaos, to sing an endless hymn of praise and to evoke the past of the universe in a sort of retrogressive Apocalypse. In presence of that terrifying resurrection, the crumb of life whose usufruct is granted to each of us in that nameless infinitude common to all spheres, and known to us by the name of time—that infinitesimal crumb of life is pitiable. We wonder, crushed as we are under such a multitude of worlds in ruins, of what use are our glories, our hatreds, our loves, and if we ought to accept the burden of life in order to become an intangible speck in the future. Uprooted from the present, we are dead until our valet enters and says to us: 'Madame la comtesse replied that she expected monsieur.'"

In "Seraphita," the scene of which is laid in Norway, we have the mystical quintessence extracted from a pious study of the writings of Swedenborg. Indeed, Seraphita herself is the daughter of Swedenborg's cousin. An outline of the Swedish mystic's life is introduced into the story, and his religious doctrines are expounded at length. Another memorable contribution to the philosophic and analytic group was "The Quest of the Absolute"; that is, the search for the one substance from which all others have been derived. "A substance common to all created things, modified by a single force, such is a precise and clear statement of the problem presented by the absolute," a problem which the hero of Balzac's novel undertakes to solve. His experiments lead him to believe that the one substance will be discovered in an element common to the three gases (oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen) and carbon. The single medium, he believed, would be detected in the element common to positive and negative electricity. He who should be able to find this one substance and this single medium would unriddle the supreme secret of all the results produced by nature. Perhaps never were physical researches of an alchemistic order pursued in an environment more appropriate and attractive than that which is depicted in this story. It is in a lovely old mansion at Douai, a masterpiece of the Flemish architecture of the sixteenth century, amid antique furniture and priceless paintings, that the quest for the absolute is prosecuted. Through the story runs a constant struggle between the intellect and the affections, between the duties of a husband and father and a scientist's recognition of his duty to mankind.

IX.

In this hurried survey of the *Comédie Humaine* we have been forced to confine ourselves almost exclusively to novels of a considerable length. Balzac tried his hand quite as frequently, and with equal success, at the novelette. Maupassant is as truly his pupil in the field of the short story as are Flaubert and Bourget his disciples in the domain of the extended novel. We should have been glad to indicate the pregnant purpose, deft construction and inimitable finish of some of Balzac's novelettes. But the space at our disposal and a reader's patience have their limits. It may be, however, not irrelevant to say that, before presuming to offer even a cursory review, we were careful to re-read almost every word of the *Édition Définitive*. Of the delight, illumination, stimulus and admonition derivable from such an experience we have been here able to give only a scant and faint idea. When one looks back over the immense expanse which a student of Balzac must traverse, one can hardly repress a feeling of awe, as if he had been, in truth, spectator of what the author meant to show us, the vast scope and the measureless variety of the Human Comedy. What nobility, what beauty, what charm is there in human nature, which Balzac has not detected and portrayed; what ugliness, what meanness, what baseness has escaped his scalpel? What phase of fascination, however evanescent, has been left uncaught; what cranny, stuffed with things odious or hateful, has been left unvisited; what depth has been unsounded; what height unscaled? The supreme novelist of the century; we leave him in his splendid solitude.

M. W. H.